

Bits from Sternwheelers Up Columbia

by Randall V. Mills (State Library book)

"Strawberry picking and a chance to see the new Cascades tramway filled the 'Lot Whitcomb in 1851 - at \$10 a head, or significantly, \$15 a couple. The stern-wheeler Westport built in 1878, spent most of ten years carrying hunters to shooting grounds along the lower Columbia, especially when the ducks were flying."

A description of Astoria as being "built on stilts over the tide flats," with lovely setting, quaint, but not a place where one stopped except to change boats to go somewhere else. A description of the wide, clean beaches along Clatsop Plains - "The country was ideal for camping, and by the 1860's many Portlanders were able to take time away from their work in the crowded city- as they thought the place had become- for a holiday at the shore. In summer whole families migrated to the beach where rather unpacked the tent and started assembling it while mother got the younger children out of ear-shot. Soon a colony of tents fringed the beach on the margin between the sand and the cool woods: from rough stone fireplaces rose pungent smoke, spiced by the smell of burning bacon, for the ladies were not sure of the techniques of cookery in the open, and the men, left to the art, paid no attention to occasional spots of char and ash that blighted the products of their skill. In the mornings and afternoons the people picnicked, strolled on the beach, wandered in the woods, or hunted and fished in the back country. Hardier ones draped themselves in yards of clinging cloth and braved the surf itself. It was a time of pleasure and of ease."

The Oregon Steam Navigation Company quickly began running special boats. In July 1862 the Jennie Clark started service, a round trip fare costing \$15. She didn't stop at Astoria but "turned into Youngs Bay and threaded up the Lewis and Clark River to Fort Clatsop. There her passengers could hire horses or carriages for the short trip through the forest to the beach, or, if they wished, they could walk- it was not too far."

By 1870 hundreds were coming and many stopping at the residence of a family of French half-breeds. (Where not mentioned) "There he ate French cooking, lived in a building 'Decidedly of a bygone order of architecture', and generally felt free from the niceties of city society."

Seaside House built in 1873 by Holladay and settlement grew rapidly. By 1876 the Bonita tried a night run. It wasn't very successful and abandoned, but night runs became an institution, two boats used being the R. K. Thompson and later the Emma Hayward. They left Portland late enough so that men could catch them after work, make the trip in the night spend a day at the beach and be back in town the following morning. They also became rendezvous and one did not mention the men he might have seen aboard, at times. Cottages displaced tents gradually, the Seaside House imposed a kind of society and the old informal parties around the fires at evening with storytelling and neighborliness disappeared. By the middle eighties mobs of people swarmed down the river to spend a week at Seaside.

"In 1871 the first of a fleet of big fine boats took to the river flying the pennant of the Oregon Steam Navigation Company. The Emma Hayward -- ran the route aided now and then by the less elegant Dixie Thompson. A decade later came the S.G. Reed, a masterpiece of machinery and ornamental gingerbread." She was later burned for her metal.

"By 1888 the memorable boats began to come to the route and compete for the business, boats noted for their speed, their lavish fittings, their comfort. UB Scott, successful in his Willamette River ventures, turned to the lower Columbia in that year and put the Telephone on the river, a long sleek stern-wheeler that could not be beaten in any race. But the crack boat was the T. J. Potter. The "Wide West" was a legend of luxury and her hull and upper works were placed on the hull of the Potter, already built with fine lines for speed and fitted for big side wheels. "Inside the cabins were newly decorated and furnished even grander than before to tempt travellers. From the lower deck swept a grand staircase, rising to a landing where it

Clatsop and

divided to reach the upper saloon. At the head of the stairs hung a mirror, the largest in the whole Northwest. In the saloon was a grand piano, ornately carved and gorgeous in a case of bird's-eye maple. In the dining room smaller tables seating families took the place of the long common table of the earlier boats. Dark wood paneling and beams ornamented the room and set off the linen and silver, and the meals, too, were memorable. Broad decks extended fore and aft for casual promenades and comfortable watch of the passing river. Gaudiest of all were the paddle boxes; from a carved lunette spread a fan of tracery and fretsaw work that made the boxes look like patterns of white lace. *** A single, tall stack rose forward of the wheels, and from a large texas towered a tall pilot house. Altogether, the T. J. Potter was a handsome boat to watch as she swept back and forth on the river." The O.R. & N. tried to use her on Puget Sound but she rolled so badly with the slightest sea running that she was immediately taken back to the Columbia where she worked the summer run for thirty years.

U. B. Scott organized the Columbia River and Puget Sound Navigation Co. and built and operated the Telephone. The Telephone and Potter raced when possible and the first Potter could win, but after her hull wore out, her second hull was changed slightly and she couldn't quite compete. On one occasion the two were ready to try when Major O'Neill, receiver for the Oregon R. & N. Co., came on board. He would brook no racing with his boats so the Potter had to wait while the Telephone disappeared around the first bend in the river below. In 1916 the Potter was hauled off the passenger run and served now and then as a barracks boat for construction crews and strike breakers. In 1925 she was dragged from the boneyard, towed to a mud flat on Youngs Bay and burned for her metal.

Seaside was growing and by 1905 when the Lewis & Clark festival was held, the river boats barely handled the crowd. The Lurline and Undine were in use, one to Cascade Locks, the other to Astoria, but a new boat on the river was the Georgiana. She was a graceful little propellor, named for Mrs. H.L. Pittock and launched June 20, 1914, by the Harkins Transportation Line. She drew crowds and kept alongside the best of the paddlers and outlasted them all on her run. She stopped at all the landings along the lower Columbia- St. Helen's, Kalama, Goble, Rainier, Buck's, LaDu, Coffin Rock, Fluhrer's, Stella, Midway, Nisqually, Eureka, Cathlamet, Skamokawa, Brookfield, Pillar Rock, Altoona. She alternated with the LeO. Hosford, named for the first captain of the old boat. During the '30s, her low rates got riders who could not afford the train, but in 1939 she gave up, there simply wasn't enough traffic on the lower river to warrant any sort of steamer's running in local service. She went to a run to the Cascades again, renamed Lake Bonneville, but that failed and she is now tied up among brightly-sailed fishing boats, where she still has her jaunty air, as if "she were about to toot her brass whistle and head out into the river."

The "Bailey Gatzert", built at Seattle, equalled in elegance the Potter, but never had the Potter's popularity. She ran on the Cascades run from 1892 on and she was fast, making the 115 twisting miles from The Dalles to the Alder Street dock in Portland in only a few minutes over five hours of actual running time.

In 1916, the big barge Swan was built to hold crowds of amusement seekers on the river in and near Portland. "Both of her decks were fitted out as dance halls, and on a phatorm halfway between them a band blared ragtime, jazz, or swing according to the tastes of the dancers. Behind a puffing tug, who made her cruises idling along the river, usually in the moonlight, or, the moon not being handy, at least after dark when romance and sentiment best flourish."

The Alaskan and Olympian had run to Astoria, competing with the Potter, but too expensive and never popular.

The Ocean Wave, a neat side-wheeler ran across the Columbia from Astoria to Nahcotta, carrying passengers for the little train that ran across the peninsula on the Washington shore in 1889. The Hassalok was another of the steamers on the Dalles run near the time of the Bailey Gatzert.

In all the excitement and nostalgic remembering when Seaside's passenger train service ended, it seemed that everyone had forgotten the very first years of the railroad on Clatsop plains. Almost ten years before any trains ran between Astoria and Portland, one was chugging along every day, at least in the summer, between Youngs Bay and the little summer resort of Seaside.